

Penn State hopeful in Sweet 16

Two teams Lions beat stand in way of Final Four

by Michael Rosenberg
Knight-Ridder Newspapers
March 20, 2001

NEW ORLEANS - Forgive the Penn State Nittany Lions if they feel good about their Final Four chances.

To make it to Minneapolis, Penn State will have to first beat Temple, then probably beat Michigan State. Well, last time they played Temple, the Lions won, 66-60. And last time they played MSU, the Lions won, 65-63.

Confident? Why not? Penn State just beat No. 2 seed North Carolina in the second round.

"I really expected to win this game," guard Joe Crispin said after ward.

This is the same Crispin who said in November that he expected to make the NCAA tournament, prompting most folks in State College to say, "The NCAA what?" And despite the predictions of almost everybody, Penn State made it.

They sealed their bid with that victory over Michigan State in the Big

Ten tournament March 9. In that game, Penn State stayed poised throughout, just as they did against North Carolina.

This team has been playing elimination games for two weeks and hasn't folded. Penn State's lone let-down of the last five games, a 94-74 loss to Iowa, was the only non-elimination game in the bunch. (Penn State knew it had made the NCAA tournament with the victory over MSU the day before.)

"That helps our team," Crispin said. "There is an urgency there that hasn't always been there. When our backs are against the wall we play best."

The Nittany Lions didn't panic because they are full of veterans. Their top three players - Crispin, Gyasi Cline-Heard and Titus Ivory - are seniors.

Seniors know what to do. And they know time is precious.

"As seniors, we want to play another game," Crispin said. "We want to keep getting after it. There is definitely that urgency that we don't want to be done yet."

The idea that Penn State could make the Final Four seems a little foolish to certain people - namely, anybody who watched this team in the season's first three months.

But in a way, Penn State fits the mold of surprise Final Four teams.

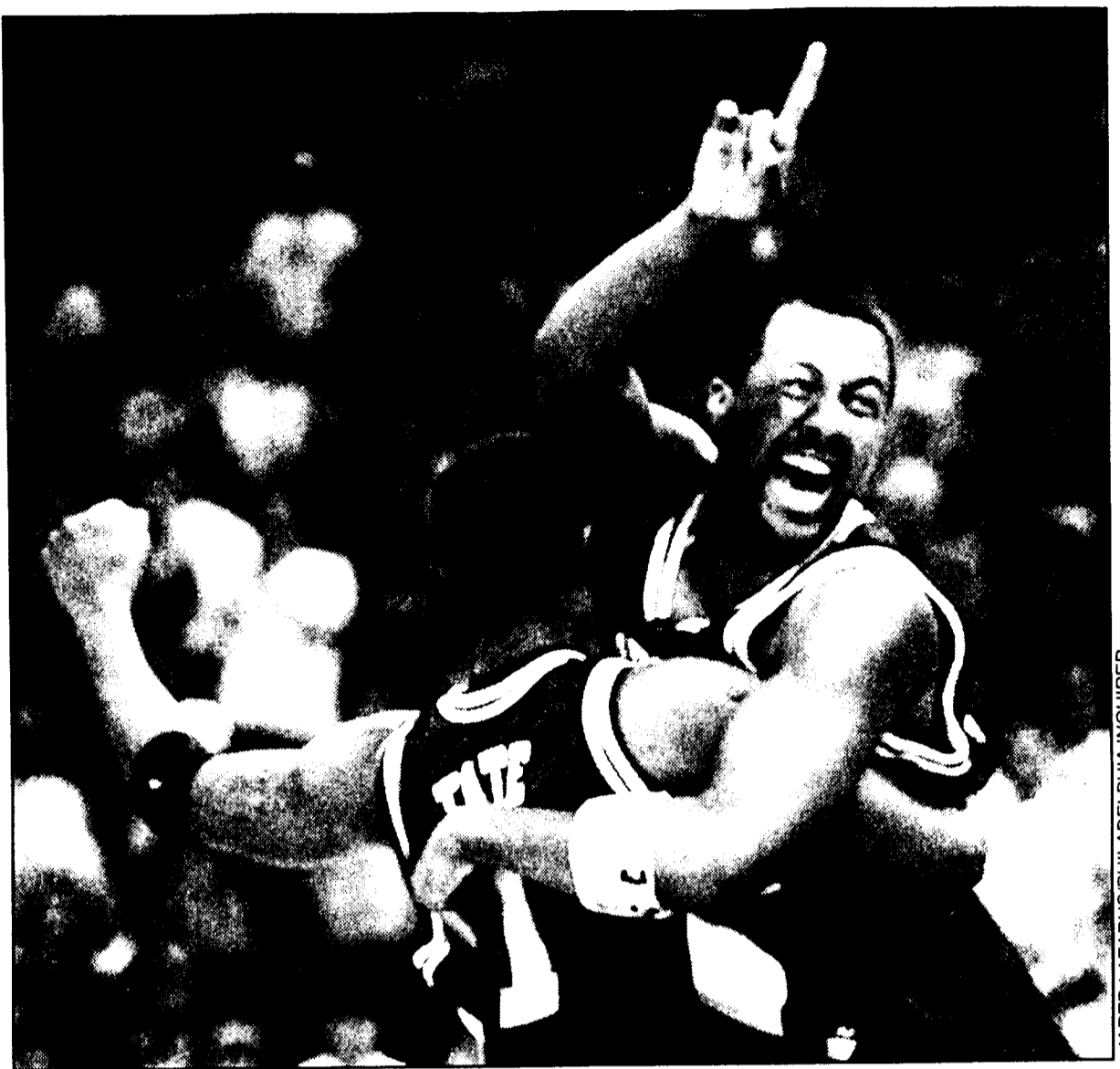
For all the talk about Podunk State beating Big-Time U., the truth is that the tiny schools rarely make noise past the first weekend of the tournament. Gonzaga's trip to the Elite Eight in 1999 was an exception.

When Cinderella goes all the way to the end of the dance, she's usually from a big conference. North Carolina State in 1983, Villanova in 1985 and Kansas in 1988 are prime examples. All three finished in the middle of the pack in top conferences, then won the national title.

Last year, Wisconsin didn't contend in the Big Ten but made the Final Four.

The Badgers made it there by beating a team, Purdue, that they had already played.

Can Penn State use the same formula, starting against Temple?



JARED LAZARUS/PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

NEW ORLEANS, LA -- Penn State's Titus Ivory jumps into the arms of teammate Jamaal Tate after the Nittany Lions upset North Carolina in the second round of the NCAA tournament at the Louisiana Superdome on Sunday. Penn State defeated UNC 82-74.

#7 Penn State vs. #11 Temple
March 23 @10:03 p.m. — Atlanta, Georgia

MLB 2001

Baseball labor leaders tone down the rhetoric

by Peter Schmuck
The Baltimore Sun
March 21, 2001

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. - Major League Baseball may be headed for another troublesome labor dispute, but union chief Donald Fehr said Wednesday that both sides remain committed to toning down the war of words that has accompanied each of the past collective bargaining confrontations.

"I think that there has been a marked reduction in the kind of public squabbling we've seen in the last several negotiations," Fehr said. "We're not perfect, but I think we're doing a better job."

The sounds of labor silence should be music to the ears of baseball fans who lost patience with the sport during the lengthy strike that cut into the 1994 and '95 seasons and caused the first World Series cancellation since 1904. Labor and management officials vowed after that debacle to work toward a better relationship, though the depth of that commitment could be sorely tested when serious bargaining gets under way later this year.

Fehr, making his annual tour of major-league spring training camps, briefed the Orioles on union business for more than two hours Wednesday at Fort Lauderdale Stadium. The current labor agreement doesn't expire

until Oct. 31, but the upcoming negotiations - predictably - were the hot topic of discussion.

There already are rumblings that ownership will attempt to extract major concessions from the players in an attempt to bridge the wide economic divide between the large- and small-market clubs. But Fehr said yesterday that it likely will be months before each side submits any major bargaining proposals.

"I don't think for a while yet," he said. "Under ordinary circumstances, full-scale bargaining seven or eight months before (expiration) would be pretty unusual. Obviously, we're doing some preliminary work and we're meeting with the other side in the ordinary course of business. If it gets to the point of real urgency, you won't have to ask."

The volume of the rhetoric speaks volumes about the sensitivity of both sides to the possibility of turning off fans during the 2001 season. Commissioner Bud Selig has made a few public statements about the dire state of baseball economics, but neither side has been publicly critical of the other.

Still, there is little evidence that either side has come off its core position. The owners continue to seek ways to limit payroll growth. The union remains resistant to anything that even vaguely resembles a salary cap.

Clearly, Fehr remains unconvinced that Major League Baseball is facing the economic catastrophe that Selig has been predicting for the past decade.

"The principle thing that has happened, revenue has gone up at a very rapid rate," Fehr said. "It has doubled since 1996. That's a credit to a lot of people. There are clubs doing well and there are some that aren't. It strikes me that the issue again will be revenue-sharing."

Revenue sharing turned out to be the major issue of the last labor dispute. The owners haggled for months among themselves to come up with an enhanced revenue-sharing plan, but passed it only on the condition that it be accompanied by a salary cap. The final deal with the players did not include a salary cap, but did include a stiff luxury tax on the teams with the five highest payrolls.

The luxury tax helped to subsidize some of the struggling small-market clubs, but ownership didn't feel it went far enough to address the widening revenue gap between the richest and poorest teams. Fehr clearly feels that is a matter for the clubs to figure out for themselves.

The industry as a whole, he says, is in good health.

"Overall, sure," he said, "but that doesn't mean it is in perfect health everywhere. Any time you have an industry that has thirty ownership

groups, you're going to have some clubs that generate a lot of revenue and some that don't. Any time you have a set of teams in different circumstances, you have a revenue spread.

"I expect ownership will put additional revenue-sharing on the table and we'll sit down and talk about it." Fehr can trot out a whole list of examples of teams that once were revenue-challenged and now are thriving.

"We used to hear that the small markets couldn't make it," he said, "but if my memory serves me, the third-highest revenue-producer last year was San Francisco, and Seattle also was up there. I tell some players now, 'Why is the movie 'Major League' about the Indians? They aren't old enough to remember that people considered that franchise a joke. Nobody thinks that anymore.'"

Selig apparently is convinced that the economic state of a couple of teams is close to irreparable. He said recently that the possibility of contraction - closing down one or more struggling franchises - "is on the table." Whether that's just pre-bargaining bluster or a real threat, Fehr doesn't seem concerned.

"They talk about that they don't talk about it," he said. "If they decide to do it, they'll have to tell us and bargain the effects. I don't think it's a terribly healthy thing to talk about."

On the major league landscape, there are twice as many teams at or near ground zero as there are teams with a realistic chance of catching the Yankees.

TOP OF THE HEAP

1. New York Yankees. Mussina makes them even better.

CLOSE TO THE TOP

2. Oakland Athletics. They have more fun than any team, thanks to all this winning.

CAN SEE THE SUMMIT

3. St. Louis Cardinals. A team with few weaknesses.
4. Atlanta Braves. Return of Smoltz and Veras will help.
5. Cleveland Indians. Roberto Alomar is locked in and ready to return to the playoffs.

HALFWAY THERE

6. New York Mets. One team that's not in awe of the Yankees, or anyone else.
7. San Francisco Giants. Solid from top to bottom.
8. Boston Red Sox. Garciaparra's wrist is just one of their problems. But they still have Pedro.
9. Chicago White Sox. Highest-scoring team in the majors banks on Wells to improve pitching.
10. Arizona Diamondbacks. Good, old players are better than young, unproven ones.
11. Seattle Mariners. Piniella has plenty of talent at his disposal.

A LONG WAY TO GO

12. Toronto Blue Jays. Need monster seasons from Delgado, Mondesi and Koch.
13. Texas Rangers. A-Rod will have elderly neighbors all over the infield.
14. Colorado Rockies. The \$121 million question: Can Hampton win at Coors?
15. Los Angeles Dodgers. Sheffield gives a rude welcome to the new manager.

JUST STARTED THE CLIMB

16. Houston Astros. Too many "ifs" (Wagner, Lima, Biggio) to be any higher.
17. Florida Marlins. By this time next year, they will rank much higher.
18. Montreal Expos. As usual, a lot of talent waiting to be traded.
19. Anaheim Angels. When Mo's season ended, so did the Angels' hopes.
20. Chicago Cubs. Starting pitching should not be a problem, but the bullpen is a concern.
21. Cincinnati Reds. Griffey can do only so much.
22. Milwaukee Brewers. New ballpark, new hope, same weaknesses.
23. Pittsburgh Pirates. See Milwaukee.
24. Philadelphia Phillies. Bowa says he has mellowed, but that was before seeing his bullpen.

AT THE BOTTOM

25. Kansas City Royals. Potent offense can't offset pitching woes.
26. Detroit Tigers. At least Gonzalez won't be a burden again.
27. San Diego Padres. Keeping Nevin was a good move.
28. Tampa Bay Devil Rays. Not yet ready to rise; watch out in two years.
29. Minnesota Twins. In need of juiced balls: team's home run leader had 19.

SUBTERRANEAN AS LONG AS PETER ANGELOS IS OWNER

30. Baltimore Orioles. Camden Yards deserves much better.

Yankees won't go unchallenged in 2001

by Sean Deveney
The Sporting News

Mariners Manager Lou Piniella liked his chances. It was just before Game 6 of the American League Championship Series last October, and Piniella had seen strange things from the Yankees, like 13 losses in the final 15 regular-season games and a division series against the Athletics that went to the five-game limit. Though the Mariners trailed, 3-2, in the series, there was reason for optimism.

"They're more vulnerable," Piniella said then. "They are not as deep as they have been. They don't have the horses."

Of course, eight days after that observation, the Yankees once again piled onto the pitcher's mound and another pinstriped World Series celebration was under way. Still, this Yankee empire is beginning to resemble Rome circa A.D. 180; there are signs of decline from within the clubhouse walls. The Yankees' 2000 winning percentage

(.540) was their lowest since 1992. In their two previous championship runs, the Yankees lost three times in the playoffs. In 2000, they had five playoff losses.

"I don't think anybody is invincible," says Royals outfielder Jermaine Dye after Kansas City beat New York, 4-3, in a spring training game last week. "Everybody can be beaten."

There are also troubling signs from outside the empire's walls; American League barbarians from Oakland, Cleveland, Boston and Chicago are lining up at the Yankee Stadium gates. One of those teams could knock the crowns off the Yankees' noggins (sorry, Jermaine, but it will not likely be the Royals) and keep them out of the World Series altogether.

Even if the Yankees return to the Series, there are bloodthirsty vandals in waiting in the National League. A deep pitching staff, plus the return of Mark McGwire, makes the Cardinals the N.L. favorite. In close games, the depth of the St. Louis bullpen could give

the Cards an advantage over the Yanks. Then there's the Braves, who still have an outstanding rotation, bolstered by the return of John Smoltz, to go with an underrated lineup.

Within the clubhouse, the Yankees' biggest enemy is time. Tino Martinez is 33 and has seen his production drop steadily from 44 home runs and 141 RBI in 1997 to 16 and 91 last year. Paul O'Neill, 38, hit .283 last year, his lowest average since he joined the Yankees in 1993. Scott Brosius, 34, hit .230. Once you hit 30, turning a year older does not usually lead to better production.

There is also the matter of Chuck Knoblauch's throwing problems, which have gone from a hiccup to a loud, unsettling belch. Knoblauch, a former Gold Glove second baseman, is coming off a season in which Manager Joe Torre was forced to use him as designated hitter because Knoblauch could not throw to first. He made four throwing errors in his first 10 spring games this year and Monday was sent to left field. The throw from left requires less precision, but the shift

to an unfamiliar position raises new questions and puts Alfonso Soriano, an untested rookie, at second base. If, instead, Knoblauch winds up as DH again, the team's lineup will get muddled. Knoblauch is the team's only leadoff hitter, and using him as a DH forces Luis Sojo into the lineup, rather than a slugger like David Justice or Glenallen Hill.

One of the Yankees' strengths the past few years, the bullpen, is also a question mark. Mariano Rivera is the closer, but the team's middle relief is in flux. The pen was lacking last season without Ramiro Mendoza, who had shoulder tendinitis and subsequently underwent offseason surgery. Mendoza is back but rusty. The Yankees previously featured two reliable setup men, Mike Stanton and Jeff Nelson. Nelson bolted for Seattle in the offseason, and Stanton was shaky at the end of last year.

Making matters worse are the improvements made by top A.L. contenders. The A's, led by league MVP Jason Giambi, added the game's best leadoff man, Johnny Damon. The

Red Sox signed slugger Manny Ramirez to improve the middle of the order. Cleveland, the last team to beat the Yankees in a playoff series, in 1997, got Juan Gonzalez and Ellis Burks. And the White Sox, who finished with the best record in the league last season, traded for noted Yankee-killer David Wells.

Each of those teams has a starter who is capable of winning two games in a playoff series. A's 20-game winner Tim Lincecum is coming into his prime. Pedro Martinez dominated the Yankees in the only Red Sox win in the ALCS two years ago. The Yankees regularly struggle against lefties, and Indians southpaw Chuck Finley is 3-1 with a 1.51 ERA against New York over the past three years. Wells, another lefty, has a 2.84 ERA against the Yankees over the past two.

"It can be done," Hudson says. "You have to forget about the fact that is the Yankees and treat them as just batters. When you do that, you can get them out. You can beat them."